

# Passive, Aggressive, and Assertive Communication



**Understanding Communication Styles**

**Steven Eastmond, LCSW**



# Basics of Effective Communication

- ◆ It matters not so much *what* you say as it does *how* you say it.
- ◆ Your communication style is a SET of various behaviors and methods of relaying information that impact all facets of life.
- ◆ The goal should always be to understand – not to be right.

# Basics of Effective Communication, cont.

- ◆ Get the facts before you pass judgment. Some styles lend themselves better to this than others.
- ◆ Learning all communication styles is important in order to avoid communicating in less effective ways *and* in order to recognize those styles in others so as to be able to deal with them.
- ◆ People are not difficult. They only seem difficult to the extent that *we* do not have the skills to deal with what they bring to the table. It is our lack of knowledge that makes the situation difficult.





# Which is the Best Style?

- ◆ All styles have their proper place and use.
- ◆ Assertive communication is the healthiest.
  - Boundaries of all parties are respected.
  - Easier to problem-solve; fewer emotional outbursts.
  - It requires skills and a philosophy change, as well as lots of practice and hard work.
  - When both parties do it, no one is hurt in any way and all parties win on some level.



# Passive Communication

- ◆ Allowing our own rights to be violated by failing to express our honest feelings.
- ◆ The goal of being a passive communicator is to avoid conflict no matter what.
- ◆ Little risk involved – very safe.
- ◆ Little eye contact, often defers to others' opinions, usually quiet tone, may suddenly explode after being passive too long.

# Examples of Passive Communication

- ◆ “I don’t know.”
- ◆ “Whatever you think.”
- ◆ “You have more experience than I. You decide.”
- ◆ “I’ll go with whatever the group decides.”
- ◆ “I don’t care. It doesn’t matter to me.”
- ◆ “Yes, yes, yes, yes, yes, yes, yes. . . NO!”





# Aggressive Communication

- ◆ Protecting one's own rights at the expense of others' rights – no exceptions.
- ◆ The goal of the aggressor is to win at all costs; to be right.
- ◆ Does not consider actions a risk because this person thinks they will always get their way. It is risky in terms of relationships, however.
- ◆ Eye contact is angry and intimidating; lots of energy; loud and belittling; never defers to others, or at least does not admit to; manipulative and controlling. Often uses violence or verbal abuse.





# Examples of Aggressive Communication

- ◆ “I don’t know why you can’t see that this is the right way to do it.”
- ◆ “It’s going to be my way or not at all.”
- ◆ “You’re just stupid if you think that will work.”
- ◆ “That kind of logic will sink the company.”
- ◆ “Who cares what you *feel*. We’re talking about making things work here.”



# Passive-Aggressive Communication

- ◆ Forfeiting your own rights initially, followed by manipulation and vengeance later.
- ◆ The goal of this style is to avoid conflict and then make the other party wish they had seen it your way.
- ◆ Avoids risk initially, risks relationships later, then acts surprised when people are mad.
- ◆ Behaves passively to people's face, then aggressively when they are not around. Often uses sarcasm.





# Examples of Passive-Aggressive Communication

- ◆ “Sure, doctor. I’d be happy to write that verbal order,” but back on the unit the order is “forgotten.”
- ◆ “I love your hair. Most people probably can’t even tell it’s a wig.”
- ◆ “I hear what you’re saying, and I wouldn’t want to make waves, so I’ll do what you say even though someone will probably get sued.”



# Assertive Communication

- ◆ Protecting your own rights without violating the rights of others.
- ◆ The goal of the assertive person is to communicate with respect and to understand each other; to find a solution to the problem.
- ◆ Takes a risk with others in the short run, but in the long run relationships are much stronger.
- ◆ Eye contact maintained; listens and validates others; confident and strong, yet also flexible; objective and unemotional; presents wishes clearly and respectfully.



# Examples of Assertive Communication

- ◆ “So what you’re saying is. . . .”
- ◆ “I can see that this is important to you, and it is also important to me. Perhaps we can talk more respectfully and try to solve the problem.”
- ◆ “I think. . . I feel. . . I believe that. . . .”
- ◆ “I would appreciate it if you. . . .”



# Assertiveness Skills



# I - Persistence

1. Stay focused on the issue – do not get distracted, defensive, or start justifying yourself.
2. Repeat the “bottom line” to keep the conversation on track and your issues on the table (e.g., “I understand that, however we are talking about. . .”).
3. Alternative styles would withdraw or would escalate this to a battle of wills that would override compromise.



## II - Objectivity

1. Focus on the problem, not on the emotions that often accompany and cloud problems. Postpone discussion if emotions cannot be contained.
2. Use the validation skill (next) to handle others' emotions so you can focus on objective issues.





## III - Validation

- ◆ Allow people to have their experience, but try to move beyond it to a discussion about the problem.
- ◆ You do not necessarily have to disagree or agree – people’s perspectives are important, but they are *not* the heart of the issue, so don’t make a battle over them. Validate them and get to the issue.
- ◆ “If that’s how you see it, that’s fine.”
- ◆ “I can see that this upsets you, and from your perspective, I can see why. Now, what can we do to make this better for both of us?”



## IV - Owning

- ◆ Being assertive means you also must own what is yours to own. If the other person has a point about your behavior, own it (this is the “. . .without violating the rights of others” part). Bulldozing over that is aggressive.
- ◆ Accept someone’s criticism as feedback rather than an attack. (e.g., “You could be right about that. . .”, “That is entirely possible, knowing me. . .”) Where is the value in fighting another’s negative opinion about us? Perspective is hard to change when directly challenged. This shows that IF their perspective were true, you’d own it.

# V – Challenging False Information

- ◆ When attacked with false and negative statements, do not fall prey to defensiveness. That only escalates emotions.
- ◆ Look for the grain of truth and validate it. This knocks barrier walls down and opens the door for discussion about the real problem.
- ◆ At times people are rigid and a more forceful stance is needed. E.g., “I’m sorry, I simply do not see it that way, but you are more than entitled to your opinion.”
- ◆ Disagree, using factual information. E.g., “Actually, I was at work, so that could not have been me.”





## VI – Pumping the Negatives

- ◆ When criticized, ask for more negative feedback – do so assertively, as though you are trying to learn more about how to be better in that area (and in fact, that should be your goal). E.g., “Tell me more about what is bothering you about my report.”
- ◆ Stay *task oriented*!!! If you slip into emotions and get offended, you lose. Pump practical negatives (not baseless criticisms) and how your actions can be improved to help solve the problems.



## VII – Humor

- ◆ Humor breaks down negative emotions.
- ◆ Humor can put tense situations at ease.
- ◆ When grain of truth is found, joke about it while owning it.
- ◆ Be careful to use humor appropriately and professionally.



# When Aggression is Appropriate

- ◆ In an emergency
- ◆ When there is not time to spend on a compromise.
- ◆ When your opinion is based on several facts, you therefore KNOW you are right, and there is not time to utilize assertiveness skills.






# When Passivity is Appropriate

- ◆ When the results of pushing the issue would cause problems that outweigh the benefits.
- ◆ When issues are minor.
- ◆ When there is a power differential that is not in your favor and the other party is getting agitated by your assertiveness.
- ◆ When the other individual's position is impossible to change. (E.g., the law).





# What is “Okay” in Assertive Behavior

- ◆ It is okay to say “I don’t know.”
- ◆ It is okay to say “No,” or “I cannot do that.”
- ◆ It is okay to make mistakes as long as responsibility is taken for them.
- ◆ It is okay to disagree and to verbalize that.
- ◆ It is okay to challenge others’ opinions or actions.
- ◆ It is okay to not accept another’s opinion as factual or accurate (e.g., getting criticized).
- ◆ It is okay to ask for a change in behavior.



# Summary

- ◆ *Every time* we decide to communicate with another person, we select a style of communication. Notice yours, and notice theirs.
- ◆ Being assertive is not synonymous with an anger management problem – it is protecting your rights without violating others’.



# Summary, cont.

- ◆ Get ALL the facts you can before you pass judgment.
- ◆ Assertiveness allows you to face confrontation in a healthy way and without getting overly emotional.
- ◆ People are not difficult. They only seem difficult to the extent that we do not have the skills to deal with what they bring to the table. It is our lack of knowledge that makes the situation difficult.